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Testimony Regarding Governor's Bill No. 947 To the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee Submitted by: Amy Blaymore Paterson, Esq., Executive Director April 6, 2015

Co-Chairs Fonfara, Berger, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) in strong support of **Sections 2 (j)(3), 13 (d)(3) and 66 of Governor's Bill No. 947, An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation and Other Purposes**, which authorize bond funding to support critical state land conservation and recreational programs.

CLCC works with land trusts (now numbering 137+), other conservation and advocacy organizations, government entities and landowners to increase the pace, quality and scale of land conservation in Connecticut while assuring the perpetual, high quality stewardship of conserved lands in the state.

Status of Land Conservation in Connecticut

The state's goal to preserve 21-percent of Connecticut's land area or 673,210 acres (the 21% goal) was created by the legislature in 1997 (Connecticut General Statutes [CGS] 8-23(b)), with recommendations that 10-percent be acquired by the state and 11-percent by "others" (land trusts, towns and water companies). The Green Plan – the state's comprehensive open space strategy – sets 2023 as the target date to achieve the 21% goal. According to the Connecticut Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), the state is "so far off the track toward meeting its land conservation goals that success is in serious jeopardy." (*CEQ 2014 Annual Report, page 3*)

Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program (OSWA)

Section 2 (j)(3) provides for \$10 million in each of the next two fiscal years for bond funding for the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) open space grant program (CGS 7- 131(d) et seq). The OSWA grant program is the only matching grant program for land trusts, towns and water companies seeking to protect open space, forests and farms. Funded through bonding and the Community Investment Act (CIA), the OSWA program provides for a grant which may cover up to 65% of the purchase price for a property -- 75% for targeted and distressed communities.

The OSWA program has supported the purchase of 416 properties totaling 29,216 acres in 127 communities since 1998 and continues to foster strong collaboration amongst state and local governments, land trusts and private landowners. (*DEEP 2013 Annual Report to the Environment Committee*) The 2014 grants late last year would permanently protect another 2250 acres in 25 municipalities.



The state's investment in land acquisition through the OSWA program has leveraged millions of matching municipal, federal and private dollars in return. Even during these years of tumultuous economic times, residents have consistently approved open space bonding referenda at the polls and otherwise voiced their support for land protection.

After years of inconsistency (no grant rounds were offered in 2009 and 2011), the OSWA program has within the last few years returned to a predictable schedule of annual grant rounds – which has helped towns and land trusts get back on track to strategically plan, effectively negotiate and budget annually for conservation transactions. Yet with the complete sweep of the CIA proposed by the Governor's biennial budget (SB 946 Section 29b) coupled with an additional proposed sweep of \$10 million from the current CIA account for DEEP's open space grant program (HB 6825, section 5), the integrity of the OSWA program is once again in jeopardy. The bonding authorized by Section 2 is thus essential to the ongoing survival of the OSWA program and the ability of land trusts, towns and water companies to continue to plan for and pursue high caliber conservation projects throughout the state.

Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust (RNHT) Program

Section 13 (d)(3) authorizes \$10 million in bond funding in each of the next two fiscal years for DEEP's RNHT Program – the agency's primary program for the acquisition and management of land for the state's system of parks, forests, wildlife and other natural open areas. According to CEQ, "to get to the mandated goal for state parks, forests and wildlife management areas by 2023, the state will need to preserve more acres every year than it preserved in the last ten years combined." (*CEQ 2014 Annual Report, page 3*) Like the towns, land trusts and water companies with which it partners, DEEP also has a list of properties in the queue which it seeks for conservation purposes. The bond funding authorized by Section 13 will enable the agency to continue to pursue these conservation priorities and support its efforts to reach its conservation goals.

DEEP Recreational Trail and Greenway Grant Program

Section 66 authorizes \$5 million in bond funding in each of the next two fiscal years for a DEEP Recreational Trail and Greenway Grant Program for towns and non-profits, such as land trusts. The creation and use of trail systems and bikeways has many positive effects on a community, including economic, health, and environmental benefits. Bonding to establish a recreational trail and greenway grant program will not only provide much needed financial resources to support efforts by towns and land trusts to create such trail systems, but will serve to leverage match dollars from public and private sources from around the state.

The public is committed to protecting open space and creating recreational opportunities because of the obvious benefits such projects provide to our environment, quality of life and state and local economies. We are grateful that the Governor's budget recognizes the importance of funding these programs, which are essential to the state's ability to meet its conservation goals and protect the resources that make our towns more attractive for people to live and for businesses to operate.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We would be happy to answer any questions and provide further information on state land conservation efforts.